DAILY FREEMAN

Hospital Group to Add Inpatient Mental Health Beds in Dutchess County Two Years After Shutting Down Services in Ulster

The Mary's Avenue Campus of HealthAlliance Hospital in Kingston, N.Y., is shown from the facility's parking lot on Thursday, May 28, 2020. (Tania Barricklo/Daily Freeman file)

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — WMCHealth is increasing the number of inpatient mental health beds in Dutchess County, two years after shutting down those services in Ulster.

Dutchess County Executive Marc Molinaro announced as part of his State of the County address Wednesday the county will partner with Westchester Medical Center Health Network to create a "Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health" in Dutchess County.

Molinaro said the county will commit $3 million to the project, which will include the creation of new inpatient psychiatric beds at MidHudson Regional Hospital in Poughkeepsie. He said that in addition to expanding its inpatient services in Dutchess, the hospital has committed to adding 60 new staff members to serve Dutchess and Ulster counties.

WMCHealth is the parent company of HealthAlliance of the Hudson Valley, which runs hospitals on Mary's Avenue and Broadway in Kingston, in addition to MidHudson Regional Hospital and Margaretville Hospital in Delaware County.

“Together with WMCHealth, we will create new in-bed, long-term care opportunities that will be a benefit to not only Dutchess but also Ulster County,” Molinaro said. “This partnership is critical. It will change and shift the paradigm in the way we provide long-term support for those living with mental health.”

In a statement Thursday, Westchester Medical Center said the funding from Dutchess County “will help us expand and enhance behavioral health services both in the county and throughout the region.”

It said project specifics, including the number of beds to be created and a timeframe for the increased services are still being determined and said the plan for Dutchess County “is a stand-alone project irrespective of other behavioral health services in the community.

“WMCHealth continues to participate in briefings with locally elected officials, state agencies and other stakeholders regarding additional short- and long-term solutions for behavioral health services in Ulster County,” the statement read.

In March 2020, WMCHealth eliminated its 60-bed inpatient mental health unit at its Mary’s Avenue campus to accommodate what was expected to be a surge in demand for hospital beds stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there was never a need for the additional beds, WMCHealth did not reopen its inpatient facility and has since sought to make that closure permanent.

That decision has infuriated community leaders and elected officials who have pressured the state to force WMCHealth to reinstate those beds.

In a statement Thursday, state Assemblyman Kevin Cahill lauded Molinaro for working with WMCHealth to increase services to Dutchess residents, but said that partnership shouldn’t let the hospital off the hook for its obligation to Ulster.

“I applaud Dutchess County for their continued focus on providing an array of mental health services to their residents,” Cahill, D-Kingston, said in a statement Thursday. “I am sure the developments mentioned by the county executive in his address will help deal with the crises in those communities.

“However, unless and until there is restoration of the full inpatient behavior health unit on a Kingston campus, Westchester Medical Center and Health Alliance of the Hudson Valley are in serious violation of the terms of their license to operate a facility in Ulster County. WMC/HAHV has been essentially unresponsive to repeated calls from every corner of the community to fully restore those services and the Department of Health and other supervisory state agencies have been derelict in their duties to enforce the Certificate of Need terms.

“In view of the unabated, if not increased, need for these services, the insensitivity demonstrated by many responsible parties is unacceptable,” Cahill added. “Enhancing services in another community under the guise of serving a region does not comply with their legal obligations or provide solace to families seeking appropriate care for loved ones.”

Ulster County Executive Pat Ryan, who has also been vocal in demanding the hospital return inpatient services to Ulster, said despite the announcement, he will continue to fight for the return of inpatient beds to Ulster County.

“It certainly doesn’t mean we’re giving up on having these beds returned here,” Ryan said in an interview Thursday. “We need these beds in Ulster County.”

Ryan said he and other county officials are having “productive conversations with the state about the reinstatement of inpatient services.

“I’m pushing for inpatient beds and I feel confident, working with the state, we’ll get some of those beds back,” he said.